

## Newspoll delivers public's indictment of Abbott as he faces Liberals' verdict

Written by The Conversation

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Liberal MPs who must decide whether to spill the leadership are confronted by a Newspoll that's truly shocking for embattled Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

Labor has a massive 57-43% lead in two-party terms, with the Coalition's primary vote on 35%, down three points since the last poll and ten points below the 2013 election level. Bill Shorten has a huge 48-30% advantage over Abbott as better prime minister.

More than two-thirds of voters (a record 68%, up ten points) are dissatisfied with Abbott; only 24% (down nine points) are satisfied.

And, as the MPs prepare to fill in their ballots to decide whether the leadership should be opened, they know what the voters think. Asked to choose between Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull, 64% opt for Turnbull, and only 25% for Abbott.

The Australian, [reporting the poll](#), notes that the two-party result is the worst for the Coalition since the last days of Turnbull's opposition leadership.

The one bit of polling good news for Abbott comes at a state level: a [Fairfax/Ipsos poll](#) in NSW shows the federal crisis hasn't washed through to the Baird government – facing a March election – which had been a big Liberal fear. It leads Labor 56-44%.

Sunday night saw intense lobbying continuing ahead of Monday's 9am party meeting, with Abbott pulling out all stops to shore up his support.

Abbott needs not just to see off the spill motion. A significant dissident vote would leave him a dead leader walking.

In a fluid situation, the Abbott camp believed they had the numbers to defeat the motion; within

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the Turnbull ranks opinion was divided about its prospects. Some MPs were still undecided.

With the paid parental leave plan already overboard in a bid to assuage critics, on Sunday the policy on the A\$20 billion project for new submarines came into the leadership play after South Australian senator Sean Edwards made his opposition to the spill conditional on the Australian Submarine Corporation being able to compete.

Edwards was satisfied after a phone call from Abbott, believing he had extracted a concession. Abbott later said his undertaking to Edwards of "a competitive evaluation process" was existing policy. Whether anything had been given away was unclear.

Interviewed on the ABC on Sunday night, a rattled Abbott had cut down his bluster. No longer was he claiming that the voters, not the party room, were the one to determine the fate of prime ministers.

"I absolutely respect the party room," Abbott said, admitting he "could" be rolled.

Abbott's position is substantially relying on a relatively solid vote from the 35-member frontbench among the 102 Liberals.

But while ministers spruiking for him emphasised there was an obligation on frontbenchers to oppose the spill, Abbott finessed: "It's entirely up to ministers and parliamentary secretaries how they vote," he said. "It is a secret ballot."

Abbott added: "I would expect that if a minister was incapable of supporting the government, the minister in question would have spoken to me, and none of them have."

But they wouldn't, would they? If he or she felt protected by secrecy, a minister hopeful of doing better under Turnbull, or with other motives, might indeed be tempted to vote for a spill.

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Abbott admitted it was “a pretty chastening experience to have a spill motion moved on you after just 16 months in government – a very chastening experience”.

Abbott’s government, “if it continues after tomorrow, will learn from this experience, will be different and better this year than we were in every respect last year”.

One difference Abbott’s been recently promising is more consultation. At the National Press Club a week ago he did not entirely swear off “captain’s calls” but gave the impression he’d be very careful of them.

Yet on Sunday there was a dramatic example of the old behaviour. After indicating the spill motion would be dealt with at Tuesday’s scheduled party meeting, Abbott brought forward the meeting to Monday.

“Captain’s call,” cried Turnbull, his choice of term fanning the backlash from some backbenchers, including former minister Arthur Sinodinos.

Queensland Liberal Warren Entsch, ahead of a meeting with Abbott, said Abbott’s decision to move forward the vote had “impacted on some people’s position”, making them more inclined to support a spill. Entsch said he personally wanted “to see a change in leadership rather than the leader”.

In an swingeing indictment of Abbott’s leadership generally another Queensland, Teresa Gambaro, said: “We cannot govern ourselves in an internal climate of fear and intimidation. And that is the unacceptable situation we have endured for the past five years.”

Turnbull, as the alternative, adopted a cautious approach at the weekend – up to a point.

On Sunday Turnbull signalled his availability if the spill were carried, while avoiding putting himself out on a limb. “If, for whatever reason, the leadership of a political party is vacant then

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any member of the party can stand, whether they be a minister or a backbencher, without any disloyalty to the person who's leadership has been declared vacant."

In a reminder of the strong feelings among some anti-Turnbullites, conservative Liberal senator Cory Bernardi weighed in with a ferocious attack, declaring that the last time Turnbull led the party "he nearly destroyed it". He warned his colleagues against going into the "moral abyss of 'whatever it takes' politics".

Though Bishop (whose position of deputy is included in the spill motion) has not publicly ruled out running for leader if the opportunity arose, it is understood she would not do so. Put bluntly, she would not have the party room numbers in a contest that included Turnbull and Abbott. Newspoll has her leading 59-27% over Abbott but trailing Turnbull 38-49%.

Abbott told the ABC on Sunday night: "I accept that all prime ministers are, in a sense, on probation. That's the way it's always been, but obviously the wood will be on me to perform. It will be even more on me to perform in the future than it's been in the past."

But previously Abbott in fact never realised he could be "on probation" – that after a stunning victory his colleagues could so turn on him. His lack of awareness has been a large part of his problem.

The question confronting MPs is whether it's worth extending the "probation".

*Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.*

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